DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 467 CG 012 125

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TITLE Dirty Old Women: The Emergence of the Sensuous Grandmother.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 10p.; Best Copy Available. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (San Francisco, California, August 26-30, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age; *Females; Feminism; *Gerontology; Life Style; *Older Adults; Reproduction (Biology); *Sex Role; *Sexuality; Social Attitudes; *Socialization; State of the Art Reviews

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the paradoxes and developmental injustices in the socialization of women's sexuality. It traces these paradoxes to an historical concern with female sexuality which centers on the reproductive cycle; sketches the processes of socialization which create a developmental injustice in the expression of sexuality in the older woman; and, finally, indicates future trends which may lead to an increased frequency of dirty old women--and the emergence of the sensuous grandmother. (Author)

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DIRTY OLD WOMEN: THE EMERGENCE OF THE SENSUOUS GRANDMOTHER

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Introspective gerontologists have informally proposed that as we grow older we become more individual (Eisdorfer, personal communication, 1974), that there are fewer social constraints on personal decisions (Troll, personal communication, 1976), and that with old age we can look forward to the death of the superego (Siegler, personal communication, 1977). No one, however, has proposed that old age is a hedonistic paradise: on the contrary, many contemporary observers have remarked upon the constrictions facing the aging, and, in particular, the aging woman, whom Troll trilogizes as poor, dumb, and ugly--that is, economically and educationally disadvantaged, and a sexual castoff.

Our focus is on the paradoxes and developmental injustices in the socialization of women's sexuality. We propose to trace these paradoxes to an historical concern with female sexuality which centers on the reproductive cycle, to sketch the processes of socialization which create a developmental injustice in the expression of sexuality in the older woman, and, finally, to indicate future trends which may lead to an increased frequency of dirty old women--and the emergence of the sensuous grandmother.

First, let us distinguish between procreative sex and sex for pleasure--which are separable in principle, and more recently in fact. For most of human history sexuality led to pregnancy: the "double standard" could be seen

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[1] Invited contribution to symposium, "Socialization to Become an Old Woman." Mildred Seltzer, Chairman. American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August, 1977.

as an effort to protect women against the byproducts of casual sex, and to stabilize the family structure which helped to ensure the safety of mother and child. The socialization of female sexuality has been focused almost exclusively around procreative sex. Small girls have not been reared to anticipate the intense pleasures of sexual contact; they have been taught to keep from "going too far," from "getting a bad name," from getting pregnant, and finally, in due time, "family planning."

The bureaucratization of female sexuality finds expression among boys, who distinguish between "good girls," potential mothers and wives, and "bad girls"--who take candid, eager delight in sexuality, and who, therefore, are suitable partners for pleasure but not candidates for a lifetime's commitment. Early attention to the educational contradiction in the rearing of girls, therefore, was expressed in terms of an inconsistency of expectations: "good girls" were expected to manage the brakes in a premarital relationship, and to discard their inhibitions on their wedding nights. Boys were expected to practice with "bad girls" if they could find them and to bring their expertise, such as it was, to the marriage bed, where it might, with luck, relieve some of the consequences of the newly apparent inconsistency in female socialization which young wives were expected to overcome.

It is not surprising that much of the contemporary feminist literature is addressed, with understandable resentment, to the obvious injustices expressed by these expectations for women. These injustices, however, are biological in origin, not social; indeed, present injustices are simply the residue of change in the fairly recent past, as a brief review will

suggest. The death of women in childbirth, once common, is now very unusual; death of the infant at birth or shortly afterward, once common, is now rare. Large families, once an economic asset, are now an economic liability. Contraception, once impossible, is now accessible and common. Working wives and mothers, once unusual, may, if present trends continue, become the norm. It is no longer rare for couples to choose to remain childless, and those who do bear children tend increasingly toward small families. These changes converge around a common theme: the steadily diminishing portion of a woman's life which is shaped by the procreative function of sexuality.

As childbearing and childrearing cease to shape the life cycle of women, what remains? It is this lacuna in our social consciousness which we must explore. As Trager (1974) has put it, "the demographic writing is on the wall:" that is to say, today's middle-aged woman can expect to outlive the two primary roles which are traditionally female, launching her children into independence when she is in her forties, and not long afterward, losing her husband, through death--or, increasingly, divorce. Perhaps we are seeing a cohort of surprised, angry middle-aged women reared unprepared for the accelerating changes in women's roles, who face shrinking personal horizons poignantly and ironically highlighted by the rapidly expanding possibilities now available to younger cohorts of women.

It is important to remember, however, that the "handwriting on the wall" is demographic, not ideological; descriptive, not prescriptive; and, most important, that it is descriptive of the present context of middle-age--and not of any middle-age imperative which mandates decline, conflict,

or sexual obsolescence. We would like to suggest that the current stereotype of the sexless middle-aged and older woman, while it is indeed an injustice, is an accidental injustice: that these women are yesterday's "good girls", now grown older in a world which has never recognized their full sexual potential. The middle-aged men who are currently facing indictment by their age-mates for the devaluing of middle-aged women as sexual partners have probably been devaluing them since youth. The injustice done in the socialization of the sexuality of women is, then, not new; indeed, we are proposing that this injustice is more comprehensive than is generally suggested. But if this injustice is more comprehensive, it is less lasting: indeed, it may be self-limiting.

The legacy of human history catches today's aging woman in a paradoxical and outdated trap. She has been taught a morality of self-restraint predicated upon pregnancy: not to be risked through untimely or inappropriate or casual sexual encounters; to be avoided in a "serious" premarital relationship; to be deferred in the early years of marriage; and, finally, to be timed appropriately. And then what?

This lacuna in the socialization of female sexuality is highlighted for today's aging woman, who is something of a "lost cause" in today's feminism. Feminists seek greater chances for personal fulfillment by making procreative sexuality a matter of personal choice, and by multiplying the social roles accessible to adult women. This movement has considerable potential importance for the aging woman, since in the normal course of the life cycle, as we have pointed out, she can expect to see her two traditional roles, wife and mother, diminish or even disappear--and it is

this traditional circumscription which the women's movement seeks to broaden.

The vacuum in social and sex role and sexual expectations for the aging woman of today is an effect--and its causes are inaccessibly part of her past. The decisions which are currently being debated in the women's movement-marriage, children, career-are already behind her: Ahead of her lie the consequences of her own past decisions: which are likely to have been marriage, to a man older than herself (an outdated expectation reflecting the anticipated economic dependency of women); children, at the expense of a career. The consequences of these decisions are likely to be a combination of social and economic poverty.

Today's aging woman is at a double disadvantage: as Troll (1977) puts it, she is "cursed" with good health and a lengthening life expectancy: more years than ever before, and less than ever to do with her time. We would suggest, however, that this double injustice is likely to have a short future. As we have seen, social injustices to women seem to have found expression in movements which are not only mirrors of social change but also instruments of social change. The pessimistic present, we believe, will soon give way to an optimistic future.

Simone de Beauvoir (1970) has eloquently described the aging woman as sexual castoff, unwanted and thought to be incapable of desire. It seems to us, however, that this woman--though she can easily be found today--will not be with us for much longer. We believe this image of women is an historical souvenir, left over from the very recent past when women's primary role was motherhood. We look forward to an increasingly optimistic future.

This optimism is not used on a simple, naive belief that justice triumphs. On the contrary: it is entirely Machiavellian. The basis of this optimism is threefold: first, the aging woman of tomorrow is the feminist of today. Thus she brings to her maturity and old age her political self-awareness, her high expectations for personal satisfaction, and the professional resources and career experience which are lacking for so many of today's aging women. And, though the feminist movement has had little direct effect on the life of the aging woman, there is growing sensitivity to the unmet obligations of feminists to their "older sisters."

The second source of our optimism is the educational effect of the current political activity, which affects not only social policy but also social consciousness. Tomorrow's aging woman will have grown up in a climate of political activity which addressed such issues as abortion, day care, and affirmative action employment programs--three ways of saying that women can be more than barefoot and pregnant.

The final source of this Machievellian optimism is the simplest: the unused potential of women today--their numbers, their health, their longevity--is a remarkable latent force. When this latent force is mobilized by the growing political consciousness of women, the aging women of tomorrow will increasingly be able to shape society to their needs. And it would be surprising if we did not find that power came to suggest sexual potency for the aging woman, just as it does for the aging man.

Today motherhood is one alternative role and work is the other. The self-fulfillment and personal actualization which are implicit in our image of a career are incompatible with the morality of sexual self-restraint which was once so necessary to the survival of women and family stability. The "new morality" is a morality of personal pleasure in a relationship of interpersonal intimacy. This morality is not, of course, really new at all; what is new, however, is the widespread differentiation between sexuality for pleasure and sexuality for procreation.

The differentiation between sexuality for pleasure and sexuality for procreation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the sustained expression of sexuality over the entire adult life cycle. We must also see the socialization of girls redirected toward a broader concept of femininity, which includes a comfortable acceptance of the expression of female sexuality for pleasure. Thus, the current transformations in our sexual values, when translated into revised processes of socialization, will bring about optimal preparation for the sexuality of middle and later life.

We believe that this differentiated view of sexuality has important implications for aging women. Our heightened consciousness of sexual pleasure--separable from procreative sex--as a natural and universal human right does not lead to the devaluation of the aging woman. On the contrary, it suggests the possibility of a lifetime of sexual intimacy, rather than a restrictive emphasis on sexuality during the years of fertility for the purpose of producing a family.

We are gradually becoming aware of the sexual potential of old women and old men, and we are slowly recognizing the pleasures of sexuality as natural

to the lifespan. It seems to us that the social changes which have given rise to current dissatisfactions in women will soon lead us to expect and to create new satisfactions. Furthermore, we believe that the natural rhythms of the life cycle bring about expressions of sexuality and love which are uniquely appropriate to each of the seasons of human life.

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